Human Rights Watch partnered with Upworthy. You won’t believe what happened next...

A case study analysis of NGO-new media partnerships

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Abstract

As media organisations dedicate less money and resources to journalism covering issues relating to development and social change, NGO’s are becoming increasingly visible as news creators, funders and enablers. NGOs and media organisations are now frequently collaborating and even making partnerships to produce news content, which is having wide-ranging effects on the field of journalism.

These phenomena coincide with the wide diversification of the news media landscape over the past 2 decades, with a generation of ‘new media’ organisations rising up to challenge the dominance of legacy media entities, and bringing with them new practices and understandings of journalistic values.

Where previous research has centred on the ‘blurring of roles’ between traditional mainstream media outlets and NGOs, this thesis explores partnerships between NGOs and ‘new media’ organisations which are not necessarily grounded upon the core practices of professional journalism, using a case study of a recent ‘content partnership’ between the US human rights NGO Human Rights Watch, and the viral content website Upworthy.

Given the vertiginous rise of digital media organisations over the past two decades, such partnerships could have a significant impact on how both NGOs communicate, and how media entities interact with NGOs, raising questions over journalistic standards, the power dynamics between NGOs and the media, and even the viability of ‘objective’ news coverage in the future.

To interrogate these issues, this thesis studies articles and videos produced as part of the partnership between Human Rights Watch and Upworthy through statistical and textual analyses, taking primary theoretical inspiration from Kate Wright’s “Moral Economies: Interrogating the Interactions of NGOs, Journalists and Freelancers”, (2016) and Matthew Powers’ Beyond Boon or Bane; Using normative theories to evaluate the newsmaking efforts of NGOs (2017).

The findings of this study could be of use to NGO practitioners and journalists who are considering engaging in an NGO-media partnership, as well as to journalism, media and development researchers.
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1. Introduction

This thesis will study formalised partnerships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and ‘new media’ organisations, using the case study of a content partnership between the world-renowned US human rights NGO, Human Rights Watch, and Upworthy, a website for promoting viral content.

Where previous studies have focused on collaborations and partnerships between NGOs and traditional mainstream media sources (Wright, 2016; Powers, 2017) this thesis explores new territory by examining NGO partnerships with ‘new media’ entities that are not bound by the same theoretical understandings of journalistic scrutiny as traditional media sources.

The thesis starts with a literature review (Chapter 2), which gives an overview of the western media landscape over the past three decades, focusing specifically on the reporting of issues relevant to non-governmental organisations, namely, foreign affairs, development, and issues related to social change. This section gives context to the contemporary environment in which partnerships have become mutually beneficial for both media organisations and NGOs.

In Chapter 3, a case study of the partnership between Human Rights Watch and Upworthy is examined. After a brief introduction to both organisations, this section firstly presents a statistical analysis of the performance of content published by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy on Facebook and Youtube. The content chosen are original articles and videos created by Human Rights Watch, and articles by Upworthy based upon the Human Rights Watch content. This allows for direct comparisons to be made between the content produced by both organisations, and how they performed on the two social media platforms.

The second part of Chapter 3 is a textual analysis of the content produced by Upworthy. The articles from the statistical analysis are measured against a framework of 5 indicators for measuring editorial oversight, which assess how Upworthy’s writers covered Human Rights Watch material in their articles.

In Chapter 4, the results of the statistical and textual analyses are examined in a discussion section, which is followed by concluding remarks and a bibliography.
2. Literature Review

In order to study the specific partnership of this thesis, it is necessary to understand the wider context and recent history of cooperation between NGOs and media organisations, alongside recent developments in both sectors which led to the circumstances in which Human Rights Watch and Upworthy would collaborate.

This literature review therefore discusses the current state of development and ‘social change’ reporting by mainstream western media sources, and contemporary challenges faced by the industry. This is followed by a summary of recent developments in the communication landscapes of non-governmental organisations, their increase in news production efforts and collaborations with the media, and current discussions around these collaborations within both sectors.

The literature review concludes by examining both the rise in formalised media-NGO partnerships, and the emergence of ‘new media’ organisations in the past decade, which challenge ‘legacy media’ for readers, clicks and revenue, without adhering to the traditional ‘rules’ of journalism by which media organisations have previously functioned.

2.1. The current landscape of media reporting and non-governmental organisations

Reporting of international news by western news organisations has reduced significantly in the past 30 years (Powers, 2017). Since the end of the Cold War, staff and funding dedicated to gathering news abroad have fallen precipitously, with many organisations closing foreign bureaux and letting go of posted correspondents (Fenton, 2010, Abbott, 2009). What scant resources remain have been put under even greater pressure since the advent of the internet, which sent the news industry as a whole into a financial crisis, as news agencies scrambled to reassert financially stable business models which were disrupted by the explosion of digital media (Koch, 2018).

Working with these internal limitations, news organisations have turned to alternative sources for content, relying, for example, on video footage sourced from agencies such as Reuters and Agence France Presse, while a dearth of reporters on the ground has led to an increased use of locally-based freelance journalists (Gentile, 2019). As a result, foreign news reporting has become increasingly homogenized, lacking in depth, and often focuses only on either disasters or conflicts (Abbott, 2009).

As news organisations grapple with these issues, which call into question their ability to carry out their most vital functions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) around the world are facing different, but equally difficult challenges. In many parts of the world, civil society spaces are shrinking (FiDH, 2019), and international NGOs are being expelled from recipient countries on the grounds of political meddling, fomenting dissent, ‘undesirability’ or simply without reason (Stacey and Bokhari, 2017; Beech, 2017; Grove, 2015).

In their home countries, many western NGOs are also coming under greater scrutiny. National governments, potential donors and the general public are becoming more demanding of the NGO and aid sector, asking for greater transparency in their practices, management and financial undertakings (Wasik, 2013). These calls have grown in recent
years following the #AidToo sexual abuse scandals, which engulfed some of the most prominent development and humanitarian organisations – including Unicef, Oxfam and Save the Children (Rawlinson, 2018; McVeigh, 2018, Quinn, 2018).

Contemporary NGOs find themselves under multiple, and at times contradictory pressures; instructed to become more professional, yet less ‘corporate’ (Magee, 2014), to increase accountability and transparency, but lower overheads and ‘waste’ on bureaucracy, all the while attracting the best and the brightest to produce ground-breaking work, without paying salaries which are competitive with the private sector.

The perceived misuse of limited budgets attracts particular attention; donors resent their contributions being used for what they consider ‘unworthy’ uses, while popular websites advising on the ‘best’ NGOs to receive donations give low ratings to organisations which are deemed to spend too much money on promotion, awareness raising and fundraising efforts (Charity Navigator, 2016, Charity Watch, 2009). The worst offenders of this practice can ultimately face closure, as seen in the infamous case of Invisible Children, creators of the viral ‘Kony 2012’ campaign (Murphy, 2014).

Yet, NGO’s are becoming ever more willing and capable of moving into the vacuum left by media organisations, and have “dramatically expanded their efforts to shape—and in some cases directly produce—news” (Powers, 2017, P.1970). This has happened in no small part due to NGO’s increasingly hiring professional journalists to lead their media departments (Fenton, 2010). Without the pressure of publication deadlines, NGO media teams are able to dedicate time and resources no longer available to media organisations, producing professional investigations which can rival, and even outperform mainstream media coverage in certain areas (Gillmor, 2014; Kaplan, cited in Koch 2018).

2.2. NGO-Media collaborations

NGOs and media organisations have long existed and interacted in close proximity, however, recent developments have led many scholars to recognise that “the spheres (of news media and NGOs) are overlapping more and more” (Steve Roberts, cited in Abbott, 2009).

Collaborations between media organisations and NGO’s can be seen as a ‘win-win’ situation for both parties. By working directly with the media, NGO’s can secure increased coverage of their work, while saving money and resources which could have otherwise been spent on advertisements and fundraising efforts. News organisations, for their part, are also able to save on time and cost by exploiting NGO’s networks and resources, as well as using their background briefings, videos and photos (Wright, 2016). This is particularly valuable in difficult or dangerous environments, where journalists often tag along or ‘embed’ with NGOs to gain access, local know-how and even a degree of protection in unfamiliar environments (Magee, 2014).

In recent years, scholars have debated whether this increase in collaboration constitutes a ‘boon or bane’ for journalism (Powers, 2017; Wright, 2016, 2018; Martin, Bunce & Wright, 2018). On the positive side, NGO collaborations can help compensate for cuts to media budgets and staff (Beckett, 2008; Sambrook, 2010), allowing them to continue to “deliver
solid, comprehensive, and richly detailed foreign news stories” (Abbott, 2009) which they can no longer afford to do alone. Wright (2016) also notes that “some have seen this trend as having potentially progressive effects, increasing the social engagement and diversity of international news” (P.1512).

However, others worry that news organisations are at times entirely dependent on their alliances with NGOs. Such relationships between UK-based NGOs and journalists were discussed in the report, ‘The Aid Industry: what journalists really think’ (Magee, 2014). Some journalists interviewed welcomed collaboration. Former Foreign Editor of the Sunday Times, (now Media Director of Save the Children) Sean Ryan commented:

“When we can team up, I’m delighted to do so. If they are exploiting us, I have no problem if we’re getting a good story.” (Ibid. 2014, P.9)

But for others, such relationships make it difficult for journalists to criticise agencies on whom they are dependent for access (Ibid, P.4). Daily Mail columnist Ian Birrell and Roger Hearing of the BBC World Service criticised these ‘patronage’ relationships, while Hearing commented:

“Agencies always have an agenda...(and journalists should)...treat them like competing businesses” (Ibid, P.9).

Wright (cited in Are, 2018) concurs, continuing that while many NGO’s claim to be “giving voice” to marginalised people through their communication output, in reality, institutional priorities often take precedence, “be that gaining political legitimacy, raising money, or exerting influence on policy-makers.”

2.3. NGO-Media partnerships

In spite of concerns raised over the increasing influence NGO’s can have on journalism, as well as the effects of the creeping mediatisation of NGO work, many organisations clearly believe that the opportunities of collaboration heavily outweigh the risks, and are moving from ad-hoc collaborations to establishing formalised partnerships with their allies in the 3rd Sector.

NGO-media partnerships are not homogenous, and can take many forms, depending on the size, resources, ambition and type of the organisations involved. I will therefore briefly present three examples which demonstrate this diversity of such partnerships.

2.3.1. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation / The Verge

In February 2015, the popular technology website The Verge was ‘guest edited’ by Bill Gates, founder of the Microsoft Corporation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the largest private foundation in the world (Murphy, 2015). The partnership consisted of four articles on topics chosen by the foundation; banking, health, farming and education.

Although the partnership was financed by the BMGF, The Verge maintained that the “partnership (drew) on a long tradition of magazines featuring guest editors” (Patel, 2015),
and the website maintained editorial independence over the articles written, giving the journalists freedom to critique the Gates Foundation’s approach to certain topics discussed during the month.

2.3.2. International Rescue Committee / Vox Media

In April 2018, US humanitarian and development NGO the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Vox Media launched the Displaced Podcast, a weekly series of interviews with key figures in the world of aid, development, humanitarian response and foreign policy. The podcast is hosted by two senior IRC staffers, Ravi Gurumurthy and Grant Gordon, and produced by the Vox Media podcast network.

Displaced is branded as an IRC product, facilitated by Vox Media, and is not listed alongside popular Vox podcasts such as ‘Today, Explained’, on the Vox.com website. (Vox, 2019). The lack of a Vox contributor means that the IRC appear to maintain complete editorial control over the collaboration.

Information on how Displaced is funded is not published, so it is unclear whether one organisation carries a larger financial burden for the project, however, it is likely that the podcast is at least partly financed through advertisements from companies such as IBM, which play at the beginning and during breaks in the show.

2.3.3. Greenpeace / Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN)

In 2018, Greenpeace partnered with journalists from the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) to investigate and then report on the recently implemented EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The project was funded by Greenpeace, but full editorial control was given to the GIJN. The resulting reports found that the EU policy was in fact subsidising some of the most polluting farms in Europe, which was widely reported by Greenpeace through its own channels, as well as by international and specialist media, who reported the findings as a ‘Greenpeace investigation’ (Ecologist, 2018).

2.4. Challenges to established ideas of journalism

These examples demonstrate the wide variety of partnerships taking place between NGOs and media organisations, and how the balance of financial and editorial contributions can vary significantly between projects.

From a ‘traditional’ perspective of media production, this raises a serious question about how such partnerships affect, and potentially weaken, the independence and impartiality of journalism (Davies, 2008; Franks, 2008; Wright, 2016). As previously discussed, this change in power dynamics can mean journalists may think twice about ‘biting the hand that feeds’. However, Powers (2017) counters that the ultimate objective of commercial news media - making money by selling newspapers and/or advertisements – can have the same effect.

Furthermore, scholars such as Gillmor (2014) and Koch (2018) believe the very idea that journalism should be protected by a “shield of impartiality or objectivity” (Koch, 2018, p.69) is actually a phenomenon limited mostly to media within North America and Europe. Koch finds that:
“In many if not most parts of the world, the liberal Western model of the necessary separation between journalism and activism is not understood, let alone recognised—one literally can be a journalist in the morning, an activist in the afternoon, and a blogger in the evening.” (Ibid.)

Even among western countries, these concepts may also be going out of favour, replaced by “post impartial” reporting which carries a clear and transparent agenda, without necessarily compromising on journalistic rigour, and is consumed by an appreciative audience. (Gillmor, 2014; Koch, 2018; Hunter, Van Wassenhove and Besiou 2017). Within this “Gutenberg moment” the concept of “blurring lines” between journalism and agenda-driven activism can be viewed as entirely as natural, and even desirable. (Sullivan, cited by Koch, 2018, P.71).

One way in which this has already become standard practice is the financing of journalism focusing on development and ‘social change’ issues. NGOs and in particular, foundations have become a significant source of patronage for ‘public service’ journalism, underwriting articles and projects on specific areas of focus in which they have a strong interest (Scott, Bunce & Wright, 2019). Notable examples of such projects include the Global Development coverage of the Guardian, which is part-funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Foundation funding produces its own transformative effect on what is reported, and in particular, who can continue to produce ‘public service journalism’. Scott, Bunce & Wright (2019) conclude that while the financial stability provided by philanthropic sources is to be welcomed, it is unequally distributed, as larger media entities are able to dedicate more staff and resources to grant applications.

2.5. The emergence of ‘new media’

Concurrent with the aforementioned transformations within the media sector has been the emergence of new media companies, many of which were founded after the creation of the internet, which challenge traditional media for viewers, advertisements and revenue. For the purpose of this study I will define ‘new media’ organisations as a distinct group which differ in a number of key aspects from traditional legacy media organisations of the so-called ‘broadcast era’.

In contrast to legacy media organisations, which were originally founded as newspapers, TV news or radio broadcasts – and which often maintain a footing within these mediums – ‘new media’ organisations are digitally native, usually only existing online, without the traditional apparatus of printing presses or large studios. As a consequence, many new media enterprises do not share a common foundational core of journalism with their predecessors.

One of the earliest notable online-only news organisations which created a ‘world changing’ piece of news was the Drudge Report, a conservative blog, which in 1998, broke the story of the affair between then President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, leading to Clinton’s impeachment (Shin, 2018).

Since then, many new entities inhabiting a “hybrid media system” (Karpf, 2016, P.22) between journalism, entertainment and ‘viral content’ have arisen to take a significant
space within the media landscape. In the US alone, dozens of new media entities have established themselves in the past 10 years, such as Buzzfeed, Mashable, Mic, Vox Media, Upworthy to name only a few, with each offering a different blend of content.

While some new media companies have invested heavily in high-quality reporting, such as Buzzfeed News’s award-winning investigations unit, others find considerable success in the aggregation of ‘viral’ content, or put simply, “repackaging work done by other people” (Kafka, 2013). Consequently, many employees within these organisations do not perform traditional ‘journalist’ roles, but are rather act as “content curators” (Waldman, 2014).

Without an offline product such as a newspaper or an established channel from which to broadcast, new media companies are reliant on generating advertising revenue by driving traffic to their websites through social media sites, in particular, Facebook. Currently, the most popular social media channels present both ‘viral content’ and ‘genuine news’ within the same format (See Figure 1), placing them on an even-keel and in direct competition with each other.

Critics argue that this has contributed at least in part to a perceived fall in trust in news content (Ingram, 2018), while numerous mainstream news organisations, including the BBC and CNN, have been accused of imitating ‘clickbait’-style titles commonly associated with low-quality viral websites in order to attract readers (Kirell, 2014; Moore, 2018). However, it is important not to overstate this effect; trust in news media has been declining since before the dawn of the internet, with the interminable churn of the 24-hour cable news cycle arguably having played an equal or greater role over the past 3 decades (Ladd, 2011; Griffin, 2017).

Nevertheless, new media sources have proven undeniably popular with readers, drawing hundreds of millions of unique visitors every month. In this new media reality, it is therefore understandable that NGOs seeking to create partnerships with media organisations would also consider these organisations as potential partners.

In the next chapter, I will study one such partnership between US human rights NGO Human Rights Watch, and the viral content website Upworthy.
3. Case Study

3.1. Background

This chapter comprises of a two-part analysis of the media partnership between the human rights NGO Human Rights Watch and the new media website Upworthy between July 2013 and April 2018. Following a brief introduction to both organisations, and an explanation of the theoretical framework, a statistical analysis is made of the performance of content published by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy on Facebook and Youtube. This is followed by a textual analysis, examining the output of Upworthy against a framework of 5 indicators for measuring editorial oversight.

3.1.1. Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch (HRW) is an international NGO which promotes and advocates for the adoption of policies to protect human rights, and also investigates and reports on human rights violations around the world (Duignan, 2008). Founded as Helsinki Watch in 1978, Human Rights Watch now has 21 offices around the world, and is headquartered in New York City. Alongside Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch is widely considered to be one of the most recognised and reknowned human rights organisations in the world, frequently cited as an expert source and watchdog on human rights issues by the international news media, national governments, and institutions within the United Nations system (Weisbrot, 2016; Pilkington, 2010).

Human Rights Watch is perhaps best known for producing in-depth reports on human rights violations which spark worldwide coverage and outrage, from which they, along with allies and stakeholders, pressure national governments to enact changes and stop forms of discrimination, abandon policies which threaten or violate human rights, and give further protection to their citizens (Duignan, 2008).

3.1.2. Upworthy

Founded in 2011, Upworthy quickly established itself as one of the most popular news aggregation websites on the internet, attracting audiences of up to 80 million unique visitors per month at its peak in November 2013 (Karpf, 2016).

Upworthy is generally regarded as the originator of “curiosity-gap”, headlines, less charitably known as ‘clickbait’, which tantalise potential readers with a small amount of information about the story to induce them to click, and are specifically designed to evoke “high-arousal positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety) emotions” (Karpf, 2106, P. 108).

However, unlike other websites derided as simply ‘clickbait machines’, Upworthy positions itself as a “mission-driven media company” with a clear progressive ideology, and aims to promote content on serious issues, including inequality, LGBT rights, gender equality, bullying and racism (Waldman, 2014).

Upworthy was co-founded by Eli Pariser, a former Executive Director of the American public policy action group Move On, which primarily fundraises and campaigns on behalf of candidates for the United States Democratic Party. The website grew out of an experiment
called ShareMachine, which attempted to generate viral news on progressive stories, using the Move On front page as a platform (Karpf, 2016).

From its inception, Upworthy’s management made clear that the website was not a producer of news. In a blog post, then-Upworthy Copy Chief Matt Savener stated:

“We’re curators, not journalists — we don’t do investigative reporting, we don’t report breaking news. But we absolutely believe in editorial ethics.” (Savener, 2014)

These ethical standards include a copy desk of fact-checkers who assess each article before publication (Gavin, 18.03.2019, personal correspondence) and the assurance that all facts asserted in Upworthy articles derive from “reliable sources such as major trustworthy media outlets, government agencies and reports, scientific experts, and authoritative nongovernmental organizations” (Savener, 2014).

3.1.3. Partnership

In early March 2014, Upworthy announced it had formed “content partnerships” with Human Rights Watch, alongside Climate Nexus and ProPublica (O’Donovan, 2014). As of May 2019, Upworthy has published 31 articles which mention Human Rights Watch. From these, Human Rights Watch was the main subject of 19 articles. In all of these articles, videos produced by Human Rights Watch were also embedded. These videos were either linked directly to the Human Rights Watch Youtube page, or were branded as ‘Handpicked’ content on the Upworthy Youtube channel.

3.2. Methodology

This study is divided into two sections; firstly, a statistical analysis of posts published by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy on their respective Facebook and Youtube channels, and secondly; a textual analysis of the articles published by Upworthy.

Statistical Analysis

At its peak in November 2013, Upworthy received over 80 million unique monthly users to its website. However, unlike ‘legacy’ news sources, which, due to their established reputations and brand recognition, receive considerable traffic from direct links such as bookmarks, and direct Google searches, Upworthy always received the overwhelming majority of visitors through stories posted on Facebook.

In order for this to succeed, Upworthy articles and headlines are written with an “intentional, laserlike focus on analytics” (Karpf, 2016, P. 95), using extensive A/B testing to find content which would receive the most engagement on social media. (Ibid.)

To understand the effectiveness of this partnership, it is therefore necessary to study the performance of Upworthy Facebook posts which promoted Human Rights Watch content, and compare them to the Facebook posts made directly by Human Rights Watch on the same subjects.

The statistical analysis will focus on the two main engagement metrics measured during this period on Facebook: ‘Likes’ and ‘Shares’. The analysis focuses on 12 articles that were promoted on Facebook by both Upworthy and Human Rights Watch, allowing for a direct comparison.
This section is complemented by a shorter analysis of a number of Human Rights Watch Youtube videos which were uploaded and shared directly on Upworthy’s own channel, measuring the total views of the videos. 8 such videos were identified for comparison.

**Justification for measuring numbers of ‘Likes’ and ‘Shares’, rather than analysing sentiment**

With regards to the analysis of Facebook posts, it is worth noting that measuring ‘Likes’ and ‘Shares’ on social media channels is normally undertaken as part of a sentiment analysis. However, in the context of this study, it is appropriate to measure and compare the number of engagements rather than whether they were positive or negative.

This is for two reasons; firstly, Facebook does not publically publish the number of ‘views’ of each post, nor the number of ‘clickthroughs’ to the corresponding article. These figures can however be viewed by the page administrator.

Nevertheless, engagement, whether positive or negative, is the most significant factor in Facebook’s ranking algorithm for organic (non-paid) posts (Moeller, 2019). When a post receives a high level of engagement, it is ranked higher by Facebook’s algorithm, increasing the overall reach of the post (Ibid). In the absence of the aforementioned ‘views’ or ‘clickthroughs’, ‘Likes’ and ‘Shares’ are thus used as appropriate measurement of a post’s statistical ‘success’ or ‘failure’.

Secondly, 11 of the 12 articles studied were published before Facebook’s introduction of an extended Reactions button collection, which, in addition to liking and sharing content, gave users the option to click buttons for “Love”, “Haha”, “Wow”, “Sad” and “Angry” (Moreau, 2016).

Without such metrics, generating a meaningful sentiment analysis for these posts could until recently be achieved with tools such as the Graph API, however, in light of the misuse of user data by Cambridge Analytica in 2018, Facebook has restricted the use of these tools (Perez, 2018), making such a study unfeasible within the time and resource limitations of this thesis.

The figures presented in this section are accurate as of March 2019, when they were collected from Facebook and Youtube.

**Textual Analysis**

The literature review found that journalists and academics question the journalistic merit of news created in collaboration with NGOs (Wright, 2016; Powers, 2016; Fenton 2010). It also found that although Upworthy does not ‘make news’, it claims to apply the same editorial standards as traditional journalism. Finally, Upworthy material is presented on social media platforms (its main source of traffic) in the same way as articles from ‘legitimate’ news sources.

It is therefore appropriate to examine the extent to which the Upworthy applied editorial oversight to the articles written during this content partnership. For this, I have created a framework of 5 indicators by which the 19 Upworthy articles will be assessed. The chosen indicators are based on a combination of criteria taken from Lacy and Rosenstiel (2015, P. 27) and the principles of the US Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (2014).
3.3.  Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the approaches undertaken in the statistical and textual analyses draw upon Kate Wright’s “Moral Economies: Interrogating the Interactions of NGOs, Journalists and Freelancers” (2016) and Matthew Powers’ “Beyond Boon or Bane; using normative theories to evaluate the newsmaking efforts of NGOs” (2017).

Wright applies a theory of moral economy developed by Sayer (2000) to the relationships between INGOs and journalists. Wright finds that journalists “justify their interactions (with NGOs) in explicitly normative terms” (P.1050), and seek to morally justify the use of stories provided by NGOs through repackaging material, in order to maintain a level of “political/professional responsibility vis-à-vis editorial independence” (P.1513).

In ‘Beyond Boon or Bane’, Powers applies a normative theory of public communication to the same interactions in order to “specify the roles that journalists need to perform in order to satisfy their civic obligations.” (P.1073) Powers finds that journalistic material produced by NGOs “most closely approximate liberal representative and participatory ideals of journalism and public communication” – specifically, they primarily aim to “inform and enlighten” the public” and actively promote public participation in civic life”.

These normative theories have been pivotal in shaping the approaches taken in the following case study. Wright’s approach in ‘Moral Economies’ plays a highly influential role in the interrogation of the moral justifications behind HRW and Upworthy’s partnership, and in particular, the decisions taken by both parties which break from the traditional relationship between an NGO and a media organisation. Similarly, the choice of measurement criteria to measure the editorial oversight of each articles in the textual analysis owes a significant debt to Powers’ ‘Beyond Boon or Bane’.

Finally, both Wright and Power’s influence can also be felt in the general approach taken throughout the study, which emulates both writers’ disinclination to treat civil society as an agent which is, by definition, a positive force within society (Ibid).

3.4.  Statistical Analysis

3.4.1. Facebook Posts: Likes and Shares

This section presents a statistical analysis of 12 articles published by both Human Rights Watch and Upworthy, which were promoted on their respective Facebook pages. The articles are presented in Table 1, with Human Rights Watch’s articles on the left, and Upworthy’s corresponding articles on the right.

In the following Figure 2, the performance of these articles on Facebook is presented. The left table shows the number of likes gained by each post, and the right table the number of shares. In each table, the article posted by Human Rights Watch is represented by a yellow dot, and the Upworthy article by a blue dot.
### Table 1: Articles by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy promoted on Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Rights Watch</th>
<th>Upworthy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Russia: Sochi Games Highlight Homophobic Violence</strong></td>
<td>Here Is The Shocking Footage Of Gay Men Being Beaten On Camera In Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US: For-Profit Probation Tramples Rights of Poor</strong></td>
<td>Apparently, You Can Send People Back To Jail Just For Being Poor. How Is This Real?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Korea: UN Should Act on Atrocities Report</strong></td>
<td>What's it actually like in North Korea? A million times worse than you imagine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raised on the Registry</strong></td>
<td>These people did something at age 12 that the world will never let them forget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US: Child Workers in Danger on Tobacco Farms</strong></td>
<td>You should stop smoking for your own health but also for a reason you probably don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US: Teens in Solitary Confinement</strong></td>
<td>Some Government Genius Thought This Was The Best Way To Keep Juvenile Inmates 'Safe'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Africa: Video on Gender Violence</strong></td>
<td>Here's How These Women Want To Be Seen — Nice And Strong, Like Queens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kenneth Roth on Bush Era Torture and CIA Denials</strong></td>
<td>We Broke Down 528 Pages Of The CIA Torture Report Into 10 Tweets That Sum Up The B.S. Quite Nicely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US: Immigrants 'Afraid to Call 911’</strong></td>
<td>He called 911 when he needed help. He will always regret it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indonesia: 'Virginity Tests’ for Female Police</strong></td>
<td>There's Another Word For The 'Test' They Made Her Take. I Don't Even Want To Say It.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US: Surveillance Harming Journalism, Law, Democracy</strong></td>
<td>The government is forcing journalists to act like criminals. Something is really wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audacity in Adversity: LGBT Activism in the Middle East and North Africa</strong></td>
<td>This gay Egyptian woman had a homophobic dad. But he went through a 'miraculous' change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Performance of articles by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy promoted on Facebook: Likes and Shares
What is immediately apparent from these figures is that the posts from Upworthy received consistently, and at times significantly higher levels of engagement in terms of both Likes and Shares than those from Human Rights Watch. In 11 out of 12 cases, Upworthy’s posts always received more Likes, and were also shared more in 10 out of 12 cases.

The posts by Upworthy received an average of 2201 Likes and 1283 Shares, compared to an average of 508 Likes and 243 Shares for content posted by Human Rights Watch. By these measurements, Upworthy’s posts received over 4 times as many Likes, and were Shared 5 times more than content posted by Human Rights Watch.

The greatest difference in Likes and Shares can be found between the Human Rights Watch story ‘North Korea: UN Should Act on Atrocities Report’ and Upworthy’s article ‘What’s it actually like in North Korea? A million times worse than you imagine.’ Upworthy’s post received 8300 Likes and 6985 Shares, compared to Human Right’s Watch’s 630 Likes and 167 Shares – amounting to a thirteen-fold increase in Likes and 40 times as many shares.

However, Upworthy’s posts were not always more successful. In the case of the articles ‘Indonesia: ‘Virginity Tests’ for Female Police’ by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy’s version ‘There’s Another Word For The ‘Test’ They Made Her Take. I Don’t Even Want To Say It.’, Human Rights Watch was more successful in terms of both Likes and Shares.

3.4.2. Youtube videos: Views

This section presents a statistical analysis of 8 videos which were posted by Human Rights Watch on their Youtube channel, which were also ‘handpicked’ by Upworthy and shared on their own channel. The videos are presented in Table 2, with Human Rights Watch’s videos on the left, and Upworthy’s corresponding ‘handpicked’ videos on the right.
Table 2: Videos promoted by Human Rights Watch and Upworthy on Youtube

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Rights Watch</th>
<th>Upworthy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Korea: Accounts from Camp Survivors</td>
<td>Horror Stories From North Korea Imprisonment Camps!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Challenging Status Quo in Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Can Social Media Make Saudi Arabia a Better Place for Women?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US: Raised on the Sex Offender Registry</td>
<td>He Was Labeled as a Sex Offender At 12, Now What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Marriage in Malawi</td>
<td>How Can We Help End Child Marriage in Malawi?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MADE IN THE USA: Child Labor &amp; Tobacco</td>
<td>Some Tobacco Farms Are Currently Using CHILD LABOR in the UNITED STATES?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US: Teens in Solitary Confinement</td>
<td>Should These Teens Be Held In SOLITARY CONFINEMENT?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End Military Use of Schools</td>
<td>Would You Continue To Go To School Amongst Soldiers, Weapons and Civil War?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Longer Alone</td>
<td>Beautiful messages of LGBTQ inclusion from the Middle East</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The videos received a combined total of 1,755,562 views, with 56% coming directly from Human Rights Watch’s own channel, and 44% from Upworthy’s channel. Upworthy’s handpicked videos added an additional 768,985 views to Human Rights Watch’s videos.

In stark contrast to Upworthy’s dominance on Facebook, Human Rights Watch received more views for their Youtube videos in 6 out of 8 cases. Furthermore, in 3 of these 6 cases, (indicated below with the titles ‘Malawi child brides’, ‘Tobacco child labour’ and ‘School military’) the videos on Human Rights Watch’s own channel received almost 90% of all views between the two channels.
This indicates a notable limitation in Human Rights Watch and Upworthy’s partnership. Although unrivalled on Facebook, Upworthy’s promotion of Human Rights Watch material on Youtube is comparatively weak, and points to the website’s potential path dependency on Facebook for its overall success as a platform.

3.5. Textual analysis

This section presents a textual analysis of 19 articles about Human Rights Watch published by Upworthy between May 2013 and April 2018. Upworthy and Human Rights Watch formalised their partnership in March 2014, meaning that the first 5 articles actually precede their agreement. Nevertheless, these articles are identical in style and presentation to those which came after their partnership announcement, and are therefore assumed to have been created during a ‘pilot’ stage before the formal agreement between both parties.

As discussed in the Literature Review, Upworthy’s asserts that its writers are “not journalists...but) absolutely believe in editorial ethics”. This section analyses that claim. While there are no “universally agreed set of standards” for measuring editorial or journalistic quality (Shapiro, Albanese, & Doyle, 2006) Lacy and Rosenstiel (2015, P. 27) suggest the following 7 criteria:

1. Presentation quality
2. Trustworthiness
3. Diversity
4. Depth and breadth of information
5. Comprehensive(ness)
6. (Emphasis on) Public affairs
7. Geographic relevance
In addition, many journalist associations and newspapers have codes of ethics by which writers should adhere in order to ensure the quality and reputation of their output. For example, the US Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (2014) defines 4 core principles by which its members should conduct their work:

1. Seek Truth and Report it
2. Minimize Harm
3. Act Independently
4. Be accountable and Transparent

Given that Upworthy’s writers did not engage in primary newsgathering, not all of these measurements can be fully applied to these articles. Equally, as Upworthy does not focus on news within any local region, the metric ‘geographic relevance’ can also be reasonably discounted. I have therefore created a measurement framework based on 5 criteria which can be applied to Upworthy’s articles:

1. Diversity of sources used in the article
2. Depth and breadth of information
3. Emphasis on public affairs
4. Independence
5. Transparency

The findings of are presented in Table 3 below, with an additional ‘Remarks” column for relevant explanatory information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Diversity of Sources</th>
<th>Depth and breadth of information</th>
<th>(Emphasis on) Public affairs</th>
<th>Independence</th>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/13</td>
<td>Sorry we broke you, and there's no legal way to put you back together.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with short editorial content. Paragraph and a half, but written like a social media comment, rather than an article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/13</td>
<td>I Cannot Believe These Men Think They Can Get Away With This In Front Of Our Eyes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with very little editorial at all. Single paragraph describing single video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>Leave It To A Religious Leader (Yup!) To Make A Totally Perfect Argument For LGBT Rights</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with very little editorial at all. Just a title and subtitle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/14</td>
<td>Here Is The Shocking Footage Of Gay Men Being Beaten On Camera In Russia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with very little editorial at all. Single paragraph describing the video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Notes</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/14</td>
<td>Apparently, You Can Send People Back To Jail Just For Being Poor. How Is This Real?</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW’s video with very little editorial at all. Just a title and subtitle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/14</td>
<td>What's it actually like in North Korea? A million times worse than you imagine.</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Almost none</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with short editorial content. 2 paragraphs of context, 1 additional source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/14</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia doesn’t want posts like this on Facebook. That's why we're posting it.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with very little editorial at all. Title and 2 sentences of subtitle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/14</td>
<td>These people did something at age 12 that the world will never let them forget.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with very little editorial at all. Title and 2 sentences of subtitle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/14</td>
<td>Meet some girls who got married and had babies when they were way too young.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with almost no editorial. Title and 1 sentence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/14</td>
<td>You should stop smoking for your own health but also for a reason you probably don't know.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with almost no editorial. Single paragraph describing the video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/14</td>
<td>Some Government Genius Thought This Was The Best Way To Keep Juvenile Inmates 'Safe'</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with almost no editorial. Single paragraph describing the video. 'Fact checked'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/14</td>
<td>Here's How These Women Want To Be Seen — Nice And Strong, Like Queens</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with almost no editorial. Single paragraph describing the video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/14</td>
<td>School Never Looked As Scary As It Does For These Kids</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video with almost no editorial. Title and 1 sentence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/14</td>
<td>Some Kids Are Getting Tobacco Poisoning, But How It’s Happening Is What’s Really Disturbing</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Daily Show video containing HRW material, 1 paragraph of editorial content, link to HRW report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Score 1</td>
<td>Score 2</td>
<td>Score 3</td>
<td>Score 4</td>
<td>Score 5</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/14</td>
<td>We Broke Down 528 Pages Of The CIA Torture Report Into 10 Tweets That Sum Up The B.S. Quite Nicely</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video, article with more than 50% of content is from other sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15</td>
<td>He called 911 when he needed help. He will always regret it.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video, longer article, but no critical engagement with HRW content, no outside sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15</td>
<td>There's Another Word For The 'Test' They Made Her Take. I Don't Even Want To Say It.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video, longer article, but no critical engagement with HRW content, no outside sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/15</td>
<td>The government is forcing journalists to act like criminals. Something is really wrong.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video, longer article, but no critical engagement with HRW content, some outside sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/18</td>
<td>This gay Egyptian woman had a homophobic dad. But he went through a 'miraculous' change.</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>HRW video, longer article, almost no critical engagement with HRW content, some outside sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diversity of Sources

The vast majority of articles analysed were graded ‘None’. In total, 14 of the 19 contained no outside sources, and were entirely based on information provided directly by Human Rights Watch. Only 2 articles were rated ‘Very Low’, indicating that they contained only 1 additional source. 1 article, (We Broke Down 528 Pages Of The CIA Torture Report Into 10 Tweets That Sum Up The B.S. Quite Nicely) was rated ‘high’ for diversity of sources. However, this can be explained by the structure of the article, which compiled numerous different tweets and articles from other news sources discussing the report. In spite of the relative diversity of sources, all tweets and articles chosen supported the perspective of Human Rights Watch.

Breadth and depth of information

From the 19 articles examined, 13 were given the ratings ‘none’ or ‘very low’ for breadth and depth of information. These scores indicate that the majority of Upworthy’s articles contained almost no formalized structure or original content. As noted in the remarks column, these articles typically contained a title and up to a paragraph of editorial comment from the writer.

There is some change in the structure of the articles published from December 2014 onwards. From this point, all of Upworthy’s output contain at least some form of structured ‘article’ as the basis of their content. However, even among the minority of articles rated ‘some’ and ‘high’, none can be said to contain enough substance to have been published by a professional news organisation.

Emphasis on public affairs

All articles examined in this analysis were rated ‘high’ for emphasis on public affairs. This reflects the significant value of Human Rights Watch’s work on a diverse list of issues. Topics of public interest covered by Upworthy during the examined time period include legal injustice, torture, violence against LGBT people, the rights of children and sexual violence against women.

Independence

The vast majority of the articles analysed (17 out of 19) were given the ratings ‘none’ or ‘very low’. This indicates that the Upworthy articles demonstrated little to no deviation from Human Rights Watch’s key messages, serving in some cases as a simple republication. 2 articles were rated ‘low’, indicating some degree of additional editorial content, although as previously discussed in ‘Diversity of Sources’ no instance of opinions contrary to those of Human Rights Watch were mentioned in any article.

Transparency

All articles examined were rated ‘high’ for transparency. This stands in contrast to ‘Independence’, however, it reflects the fact that clear and explicit indications were given for all material which was provided by Human Rights Watch, and including additional links to the Human Rights Watch website.
4. Discussion

This section discusses the results of the statistical and textual analyses carried out in the Chapter 3 case study.

4.1. Statistical success, target audience divergence

The figures presented in the statistical analysis indicate that the majority of Upworthy’s posts outperformed those of Human Rights Watch, with some posts reaching audiences many times greater than those of HRW. From the perspective of an NGO media team aiming to increase their organisation’s visibility, and exceed internal key performance indicators (KPIs), this partnership could therefore appear to have been a resounding success.

Upworthy’s ‘clickbait’ titles, A/B testing and focus on analytics to enhance like- and share-ability helped Human Rights Watch to reach a vast new audience which would never have otherwise encountered their stories. It should be noted, however, that these new readers may not belong to the expected demographic often associated with ‘new media’ organisations and ‘viral’ news consumption.

Although it is often assumed that the target audiences of websites such as Upworthy and Buzzfeed are “progressive young readers, dubbed “millennials” or “Generation Y”” (Ball, 2014), Upworthy’s primary reading and sharing audience actually “skews both female and 40+”, a trend well-known to news aggregation websites (Dewey, 2016). Ironically, one such new media entity, Viral Nova, achieved huge success by training its millennial writers to think like “40- or 45-year-old women.” (Ibid.) NGO’s considering such a media partnership should therefore carefully examine whether their intended target audience aligns with the true readership of their prospective collaborator.

4.1.1. Path dependence

The statistical analysis found that while Upworthy’s reach was unrivalled on Facebook, their ability to promote Human Rights Watch material on their Youtube channel was comparatively weak, and Human Rights Watch actually outperformed Upworthy in almost all cases examined on this platform.

This indicates a significant limitation in Human Rights Watch and Upworthy’s partnership, and points to a potential risk of such collaborations. Upworthy’s ‘path dependence’ on a single platform for its audience made them vulnerable to larger changes and developments in the wider world of social media which could affect their ability to reach their, and by extension, HRW’s intended audience.

Indeed, this was the case in November 2014 - 4 months before the Human Rights Watch-Upworthy partnership – when changes to Facebook’s newsfeed algorithm aimed at reducing clickbait “threw Upworthy off a cliff”, and resulted in a precipitous fall in unique monthly visitors in the site; from 87 million at its peak, to 20 million by November 2014 (Sanders, 2017). Although the partnership was still undoubtedly successful in terms of increasing Human Rights Watch’s visibility, the NGO’s media team may still have felt understandably frustrated that the audience reach of their partner had fallen by 75% in the months prior to their collaboration.
In order to mitigate this risk, NGO’s considering media partnerships may wish to consider two options. Firstly, they could aim to collaborate with older ‘legacy’ news organisations with established, long-term readerships, and part or full-subscription models, as they are less vulnerable to sudden changes in the digital landscape. Alternatively, they may also wish to seek out new media partners who reach their audience through a diversified range of platforms, avoiding the pitfalls of path dependency described in this study.

4.2. Editorial responsibility

As previously discussed, this partnership with HRW enabled Upworthy to successfully share “stuff that matters” with the world, however, the formidable confidence and clarity of purpose with which they reached and engaged their audiences was notably lacking in the content of their articles.

Upworthy maintains that their content is not journalism, but as was shown in the literature review, their articles were presented to their audience in the same format, and in direct competition, to ‘real news’ on social media platforms. It is perhaps as a consequence of this fact that Upworthy’s management still felt an obligation to at least attempt to emulate the editorial standards of the ‘legacy’ news organisations, however, in spite of their declared commitment to editorial ethics, the textual analysis proves unequivocally that outside of fact-checking, Upworthy’s articles on Human Rights Watch did not come close to applying commonly understood editorial or journalistic standards.

The overwhelming majority of articles analysed were found to be entirely lacking in depth of content. Some articles contained only a Human Rights Watch video, while others consisted of little more than a single paragraph reproducing Human Rights Watch’s key messages without further elaboration.

4.2.1. ‘Clickbait’ headlines

The results of the statistical analysis confirmed the potency of Upworthy’s headlines for enhancing the engagement rates of Human Rights Watch’s articles. However, looking beyond the figures, it could be argued that many title choices are in fact so poor and misjudged that they could have potentially damaged the reputation of Human Rights Watch, and undone any potential benefit gained from enhanced performance metrics.

One such article presents a video in which South African Archbishop Thabo Cecil Makgoba condemns violence against LGBT people with the title, ‘Leave It To A Religious Leader (Yup!) To Make A Totally Perfect Argument For LGBT Rights’ (Gillis, 2013). While certainly evocative, Human Rights Watch’s stakeholders within religious communities could reasonably take offense to this glib, thoughtless title, which could have undermined their future working relationships with the NGO.

Others headlines are so misleading or confusing, that they could make readers take Human Rights Watch’s work less seriously, such as ‘I Cannot Believe These Men Think They Can Get Away With This In Front Of Our Eyes’ (Warren, 2013), which gives no information about the event covered. The article in fact reported the mass-sexual assaults of women in Tahrir Square, Cairo, during protests against the policies of then-Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.
4.2.2. Transparency and Independence

The content partnership between HRW and Upworthy consisted of Upworthy staff doing write-ups of HRW video material (Albright-Hanna, 11.03.2019, personal correspondence). All articles contain complete, unedited, branded videos made by Human Rights Watch.

As discussed in the Literature Review, featuring branded video content does not necessarily compromise the editorial independence of a media entity. In the aforementioned partnership between the Verge and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, all of these articles contained BMGF-branded videos featuring Gates himself speaking to the Verge’s audience. But unlike the Verge, Upworthy does not at any point challenge or analyse the Human Rights Watch material; instead, it is presented as inherently and sufficiently reliable to be published on its own. Only 2 of the 19 articles examined contained sources which were not from Human Rights Watch, which in both cases supported HRW’s positions.

This approach presents something of a unique paradox; Upworthy are highly transparent about the low level of independence they have over their own articles. This stands in direct contrast to Wright’s (2016) finding that when using NGO-derived material, ‘traditional’ media sources often deliberately obscure sources to appear more independent, believing that “attributing footage to other people weakens the journalism” (Ibid, P.1519). This is not a concern to Upworthy – in fact, from their perspective, their articles are strengthened by the fact the expert content is produced by HRW, rather than themselves.

In this partnership, Upworthy entirely abdicates its responsibility as an expert information provider, and acts, in essence, as a mouthpiece for the NGO. Where the Verge’s journalists maintained the right and responsibility to critique their benefactors, the articles produced by Upworthy allow HRW to effectively bypass the normal ‘filters’ of journalistic scrutiny. While neither deception nor lack of independence should be acceptable, Upworthy’s practice signifies a complete reversal in the traditional power-relations between NGOs and media organisations. The Literature Review did not uncover any other cases of such relationships between NGOs and media organisations, and the reasons for the change relate directly to the described relinquishing of standard journalistic practices by Upworthy.

Based on these findings, it is therefore reasonable to predict that other such partnerships with new media entities could emulate this ‘unbalanced’ relationship, and perhaps without the level of transparency given by Upworthy. This would have wide-ranging, and likely negative consequences on development and social change-focused journalism. Recalling Hearing (2014) and Wright (2018), journalists have played an important role in discerning NGOs private agendas from claims of “giving voice” to marginalized groups – a practice which would – in such partnerships – be lost.

4.3. Improving engagement with ‘unpopular’ stories

From Upworthy’s editorial perspective, the articles produced through this collaboration align closely with their self-designation as a “mission-driven media company”. Upworthy’s management believed that the website’s name, and the proliferation of lesser ‘clickbait factories’, led to a widespread misperception that their content was little more than “a
cheap hit” of uplifting news (D’Addario, 2013, Albright-Hanna, 11.03.2019, personal correspondence).

However, these articles indicate a strong commitment on Upworthy’s part to promote impactful and serious stories on sometimes difficult and controversial issues – while reaching high levels of engagement in the process. To give two striking examples from the case study, one article covered mandatory virginity tests for Indonesian police applicants (Orr, 2015), while another broached the issue of US citizens placed on sex offender registries for life for sexual offenses committed during their own childhoods (Karsch, 2014).

Ron, Ramos, and Rodgers (2005) find that NGO’s prioritize policies and campaigns they believe will receive the greatest coverage in the media. This means that issues and countries deemed ‘unimportant’ to the press can be seen as ‘lost causes’ and are neglected. In the words of one Amnesty International executive,

“You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn’t give a rat’s ass about Mauritania”. (Ibid. P.576)

New media organisations willing to take risks and rework ‘unpopular’ stories therefore offer an opportunity to NGOs, who can focus more on where they think the most important and impactful work can be done, rather than kowtowing to the demand for stories about people and countries that mainstream news organisations believe their audiences ‘care about’.

4.4. Timing, and the ‘newness’ of news

A concluding point of discussion uncovered in this analysis relates to the timing of article publication, which can offer a unique opportunity for NGOs and new media organisations. Hunter, Van Wassenhove and Besiou (2017, P.10) find that true reform and social change driven through media interventions are rarely the result of a single article, but are the result of sustained, long-term campaigns over many months, and sometimes, years. This limits the influence of traditional news media sources, which, outside of well-resourced investigations, rarely follow stories beyond the initial ‘scoop’, meaning that an NGO’s advocacy efforts can peter out after an initial wave of outrage and support.

However, new media organisations, particularly those which ‘curate’ or ‘aggregate’ stories, are not bound by the ‘newness’ of news. Upworthy’s articles covering Human Rights Watch were published on average 4.5 months after they were first reported and publicised by the NGO. In fact, one article on the use of solitary confinement in US juvenile detention centres was published more than 1½ years (20 months) after it was initially reported by HRW.

This arrangement creates an additional mutual benefit for both parties. New media companies can ‘resurrect’ older stories for their audience, and reach levels of engagement on par with ‘breaking’ news, and by incorporating new media organisations into their long-term communication strategies, NGOs like Human Rights Watch can reinvigorate ongoing campaigns by essentially ‘recycling’ their older communication material.
5. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the emerging practice of NGOs and ‘new media’ organisations making formalised partnerships to produce news content on issues relating to development and social change.

It has aimed to interrogate questions at the heart of Communication for Development (C4D), including the role and responsibility of both sectors in the framing of development and social change discussions in the media landscape, the changing relationship between those with the power to communicate on these issues, and questions of whether such reporting can – or should – aim to be ‘objective’.

This thesis also confronts a perennial dilemma of NGOs, which I have personally experienced from my own time working within the communication departments of numerous human rights organisations. How can NGOs communicate in a way which both ‘does well’ and ‘does good’ – achieving both satisfactory attention from the target audience, and also presenting the target message optimally, without sensationalising, exaggerating or diminishing the ‘original’ story. The findings of this thesis do not offer concrete answers to these questions, but could offer some useful insights for NGO practitioners, journalists or researchers considering these challenges.

The chosen case study of Human Rights Watch and Upworthy highlights the considerable risks and rewards of NGO-‘new media’ partnerships, realising both the ambitions of their proponents, and also the worst fears of their detractors.

On the positive side, the study demonstrates the potential of NGO-new media partnerships to not only bring development and social change stories to vast new audiences, but also to elevate issues traditionally considered ‘unpopular’ by the mainstream media, and to reinvigorate longstanding campaigns months and even years after they are published.

Yet, NGOs wishing to create ‘impactful’ communications or campaigns which both do well and do good would not be advised to follow the blueprint of this partnership with the hope of emulating impressive figures borne out in the statistical analysis. Firstly, Upworthy’s success as a media partner proved to be unsustainable; despite catching ‘lightning in a bottle’ for a time, their ‘curiosity gap’ headlines and vacuous articles were quickly copied, satirized, derided, and discarded.

Furthermore, while the website can be commended for putting its considerable engagement acumen at the service of promoting “stuff that matters”, the articles on Human Rights Watch were ultimately unsuccessful in balancing their ‘virality’ with substance, resulting in simplistic, at times objectionable content which diminished the quality of the original research, and could have damaged the reputation of the NGO.

One can speculate that in spite of Human Rights Watch’s international standing as a thought-leader on human rights issues, had any of the Upworthy articles analysed become a worldwide viral sensation, it is possible that they would have received the same backlash of other highly mediatized and one-dimensional campaigns of recent years, such as the ill-fated ‘Kony 2012’ movement of Invisible Children Inc.

The analysis also found that the partnership between Upworthy and Human Rights Watch had resulted in complete reversal in the traditional power-relations between NGOs and media organisations. And in spite of assurances of maintaining editorial standards, the case
study revealed an alarming credulity on the part of Upworthy, who deferred to their NGO partner as ‘the experts’ and allowing material to be published entirely unchallenged, with the website serving as little more than a conduit.

Although Human Rights Watch and Upworthy’s partnership was a decidedly mismatched affair, this thesis identified a number of recommendations which NGO practitioners may wish to implement to create more sustainable, balanced partnerships with media organisations in the future.

On a practical level, NGOs should consider carefully whether they can reach their target audience through the readership of the media entity, and if possible, also ensure that their partner has a sufficiently diversified range of channels which are not susceptible to sudden changes.

Secondly, in light of the recent fall in popularity of viral news websites, and a growing wariness among readers of ‘fake news’, NGOs should insist on greater journalistic rigour from their partner rather than less, and where possible, should maintain “mutual independence” (Koch, 2018, P.77) from each other, with clearly defined boundaries.

Finally, while not wishing to dissuade NGOs from collaborating with more innovative media partners, they should seek to avoid, where possible, media organisations reliant upon any specific gimmick or trend, which could result in the same Icarus-like trajectory of Upworthy, grounding the ambitions of the partnership before it has a chance to take full flight.
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